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CIA's spy unit to be cut by 25%

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WASHINGTON — Discarding its traditional cloak and dagger, the Central Intelligence Agency is initiating major personnel cuts which some insiders predict will cripple the CIA's once elite clandestine service.

Confirming other sources inside the agency, a CIA spokesman told The Detroit News that 820 jobs would be eliminated within the Directorate of Operations, official designation of clandestine service.

According to the sources, this will represent roughly a 25-percent personnel cut in the CIA element primarily concerned with the human side of intelligence — espionage and counterespionage.

The effect, however, will be even deeper than the 25-percent figure, since the firings and forced retirements apparently will involve mostly officers and other senior people rather than the clerical and technical support workers who comprise about half of the Operations Directorate's 4,000-odd posts.

The decision to slash what some now regard as the old-fashioned if not outmoded human functions of the intelligence game is based, according to supporters of the plan, on enormous increases during the past decade in what can be learned through satellite and electronic means, sources — a clandestine services veteran dismissed as "gadgets."

"Gadgets" or not, the same source conceded that at least 80 percent of the secret intelligence gathered by the United States is obtained that way rather than from human agents.

"But there's no gadget," he declared, "that can look inside Brezhnev's head or find out any of the human factors that provide vital shading to the raw facts we get from the satellites."

The above reservation about sole reliance on satellites and other technical intelligence-gathering devices was recently echoed by Defense Secretary Harold Brown. Commenting with concern on reported recent Russian progress in satellite-killing space warfare, Brown asked, "If the satellites are blinded, what have we got?"

Heavy cuts in the clandestine service are said to represent a personal decision by the director of central intelligence, Adm. Stansfield Turner, but sources say that the impetus came directly from Vice-President Walter Mondale and David Aaron, White House deputy assistant for national security affairs.

Both Mondale and Aaron — who worked as a staffer for the Senate's Committee on Intelligence — have long been regarded as adversaries or at least severe critics of the CIA. Mondale nonetheless has been assigned by President Carter to oversee the intelligence community, and Adm. Turner is reported to have developed rapport with the vice-president.

A particular source of resentment within the clandestine service is that, in announcing the forthcoming personnel cuts to a closed meeting of senior CIA officials, Turner is reported to have said the slashes were being initiated in accordance with the recommendations of the director of operations, William Welles.

Sources close to Welles deny this flatly and say the edict came directly from Turner. More specifically, they say, the shape and character of the cuts, and in some cases selection of individuals to be axed, can be laid at the door of Turner's special assistant Robert D. Williams.

Williams has been at the admiral's side throughout his rapid rise from a junior Navy systems analyst a decade ago. Given a wide-ranging mandate by Turner to probe CIA operations, Williams has been described by agency sources as "Turner's hatchet-man and spy."

Panels are now deciding who is to go. "The top people who have the techniques and the doctrine and the experience will be canned," prophesied a CIA official.

Denying this, an agency spokesman said the cuts would be spread out over two years and would be based on performance evaluation. He also attributed them not to any top-level prejudice against CIA's old ways and old hands but to a need to cut back agency operations in the Far East since Vietnam.

Even more battered than the agency as a whole, the clandestine service suffered heavy casualties under the previous administration when its once internationally renowned counterintelligence team, headed by the legendary James Angleton, was disbanded in 1976. Together with his two principal deputies, Angleton, credited among other coups with exposure of British intelligence's high-ranking Moscow defector Kim Philby, was forced to retire, reportedly because of congressional displeasure with his unsparing methods.

Among the few intelligence-community sources prepared to justify the large cut in cloak-and-dagger capabilities, one official predicted that the result would simply be a "leaner and meaner" clandestine service.

A colleague was less sanguine. "Life has stopped," he said, "for the clandestine service."

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